

## **Alternatives-to-Suspension Cohort 2 Grant Projects**

### **Introduction**

In 2012-2013, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) awarded grant funds to four school districts to develop alternatives-to-suspension programs and implement interventions that reduce the need for suspension as a response to disciplinary incidents. This report describes the grantee's plans and progress in the first year of the grant.

Several of the grantee's reported that their discipline data is consistent with alarming state and national data showing that Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students are suspended at disproportionately higher rates than their peers. Disparities in school discipline due to race have been consistently documented in over 20 studies for over 30 years (American Psychological Association, 2006). This disproportionality is inconsistent with the lack of evidence that students of color engage in misbehavior at higher rates than their peers (Skiba, 2002). Instead, research has found that students of color are suspended for more subjective reasons than their peers (Skiba et al., 2002). Cultural competence has emerged as a key factor in decreasing this disproportionality. Grantees have reported positive results from efforts to increase cultural competence. Examples of such efforts include: training staff in cultural competence, implementing evidence-based interventions that are culturally responsive, and revising discipline policies to increase cultural responsiveness.

### **Results**

- Duluth Denfeld High School had a 60 percent decrease in out of school suspensions (OSS) during the months of September-November the first year of the grant.
- As a result of their efforts, District #622 decreased the number of out of school suspensions by 9 percent the first year of the grant.
- Implementing alternatives-to-suspension as a part of a Positive Behavior interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework in the St Cloud Area schools involved in the grant resulted in a 130 percent reduction of office discipline referrals (ODR) and a 32% reduction in out of school suspensions.
- At Winona High School the number of out of school suspensions of 1 day or more decreased from 132 in 2011-12 to 124 in 2012-13.

## **Duluth Denfeld High School**

Denfeld High School is located in the western part of Duluth, Minnesota, with approximately 1,200 students. The school community has a racial and economic breakdown of 78 percent white, 22 percent students of color with 58 percent of students receiving free and/or reduced lunch. The consolidation of high schools and a decline in staff and program resources contributed to an increase in behaviors and suspensions. In the 2011-12 school year, Denfeld had 148 total suspensions. 58 percent of office discipline referrals were for disruptive conduct.

The Denfeld team applied for the grant with the goals of decreasing the number of suspensions in general and for students of color and students with special needs, specifically. They are using the grant to supplement ongoing Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) and cultural competence training. They plan to develop a multi-tiered system that reduces the number of suspensions and improves support and procedures to address accountability, clarity, and consistency with cultural awareness. Several student focus groups, with underrepresented and culturally diverse populations were held to surface student voices and to insure the PBIS rubric is interculturally appropriate.

During the first grant year, the Denfeld team utilized monthly early release days to train staff. They focused on using PBIS framework to educate all students on building wide behavior expectations in all areas of school and at events/activities. The team identified “bottom line” behaviors that will result in an out-of-school suspension (OSS) to increase the clarity of behavioral consequences. The Denfeld team also provided student and staff training on Intercultural Conflict Styles and communication patterns. They worked within the Intercultural Leadership Project (ILP) to frame the restorative nature of interventions so that they can better understand the worldview of the students and determine if the perceived misbehavior a cultural misunderstanding or miscommunication.

The Denfeld team also utilized our existing Referral Room (RR) to support students in remaining in school as opposed to using OSS. The ATS/RR school provided support, resources and a restorative climate in place of out-of-school suspensions. Denfeld had a 60 percent decrease in suspensions during the months of September-November the first year of the grant.

Contact: Tonya M. Sconiers, Principal  
[TonyaM.Sconiers@Duluth.k12.mn.us](mailto:TonyaM.Sconiers@Duluth.k12.mn.us)

## **North St. Paul/Maplewood/Oakdale, District #622**

During the 2011-2012 school year, District #622 had 776 out-of-school suspension (OSS) days in grades 6-12. In both the middle and high schools, black students were overrepresented in suspensions as compared to the general student population. The top five reasons for office referrals were: disrespectful/defiant behavior, truant, fighting/assault, disruptive and detention absence. These were also the highest behaviors that result in suspension.

District #622 believes that cultural misunderstanding and lack of alternatives contribute to suspensions. In order to decrease OSS, the district needs to assure that all staff and administrators come from a mindset that challenging behavior is communication and an opportunity for intervention and skill building.

District #622 applied for the grant with the goal of reducing suspensions and increasing support for students. During the first year of the grant, District #622 built a foundation for alternatives to suspension. First, they asked all administrators enter all conditions for suspensions into their data collection system. Second, they analyzed the conditions for suspensions and created a comprehensive list of alternatives to suspension. Next, building administrators attended training by Sharroky Hollie on culturally and linguistically responsive strategies and alternatives to suspensions. After, a work group convened and designed uniform office referral discipline form and that is currently in use across the district. The form aligns and supports culturally and linguistically responsive concepts.

Each building is working towards implementing a multi-tiered framework of research-based practices with culturally and linguistically responsive approaches. One of the research-based interventions is Check and Connect. Check & Connect is a comprehensive intervention designed to enhance student engagement at school and learning for marginalized, disengaged students. The district plans to target students who have received ten or more out-of-school suspensions (OSS). Check & Connect mentors will keep track of grades, number of suspensions, and attendance in addition to provide students with mentoring, skills instruction, and support.

The district plans to track social-emotional outcomes for students involved in the alternative to suspension program as measured by the school climate survey. The team will also use the Minnesota Student Survey to evaluate school climate. Together, this information will guide continuous improvement of the alternatives-to-suspension grant project.

As a result of their efforts, District #622 decreased the number of suspensions by 9 percent the first year of the grant.

Contact: Cory McIntyre, Director of Student Support  
[CMcIntyre@ISD622.org](mailto:CMcIntyre@ISD622.org)

## **St. Cloud Area Schools**

St. Cloud Area School District 742 serves over 9,500 students in grades PreK-12. The number of limited English proficient (LEP) students served in District 742 increased from 320 in 2000-01 to over 1,000 in 2012-13. During the 2011-12 school year, there were a total of 16,374 office discipline referrals (ODR) district-wide and 458 out-of-school suspensions (OSS). The majority of the incidents occurred at the secondary schools. Disruptive behavior and insubordination were the offenses with the largest number of incidents.

The St. Cloud School District is using the Alternatives-to-Suspension grant to develop a systemic approach to integrate the Alternative to Suspension Program with St. Cloud's Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) Framework. In addition to the PBIS team, each school has a Tier II/III Team comprised of school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and other support staff that focuses on the students who need more support.

School engagement is a focus of the Alternatives-to-Suspension Program. School engagement describes students' positive perceptions and feelings about school, teachers, and peers as well as their active participation in school and learning. When students are disengaged, problem behavior tends to increase and learning decreases. During the first year of the grant, participating school personnel have received comprehensive training on the Check and Connect intervention. Check and Connect is a comprehensive intervention designed to enhance student engagement for marginalized, disengaged students, through relationship building, problem solving and capacity building, and persistence. Select staff has also received training on the Behavior Education Program Check In Check Out.

The St. Cloud School District will administer the School Success Profile (SSP), a comprehensive, self-report assessment tool for middle and high school students, to identified students who are at-risk of school failure. The SSP will identify assets and risk factors that affect the level of student engagement and suggest targets for intervention. The district has purchased a data warehouse called TIES that includes a personalized learning plan (PLP). Once students have completed the SSP, the Tier II/III teams will write a personalized learning plan for each student who needs more support. Personalized learning plans will be based upon the SSP and other relevant data including Office Discipline Referrals, attendance and academic performance. Intervention strategies in the PLP include a range of options such as: Check In Check Out, Check and Connect, environmental restructuring, and additional instruction targeted social/emotional skills.

Contact: Patty Popp, Executive Director of Student Services and Special Education  
[Patty.Popp@ISD742.org](mailto:Patty.Popp@ISD742.org)

## **Winona Senior High School**

Winona Senior High School (WSHS) provides education services to approximately 1,100 students in grades nine through twelve. Thirty-one percent of students participate in the free or reduced lunch program. Special Education services are provided to 14 percent of students. In the 2011-2012 school year, discipline referrals totaled 2,298. Forty-five percent of out-of-school suspensions are given for being tardy, skipping school, missed detentions and Saturday School. The WSHS team is using the Alternatives to Suspension grant in two ways. First, WSHS staff is addressing school connectedness by implementing positive behavior supports (PBS). They will train coaches to assist staff in building the capacity to use PBS in the classroom. Second, WSHS will establish a partnership with Family and Children's Center (FCC), a counseling center that offers supports to families and children in the community. The FCC's Leadership program provides full-time, structured alternative education. The program incorporates a choice consequence model along with positive behavioral support and will be offered as an alternative to suspension. The Problem Solving Team (PST) at WSHS will lead the planning, implementing, and evaluating of the two new initiatives. The PST is a group of teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and counselors who meet weekly to address academic, behavioral, and emotional problems of specific students. The PST's role is to offer the best possible academic experience to each student. Utilizing data for decision-making is central to the WSHS team's plan. The WSHS administrators will involve students, families, and the community in the development of interventions by inviting them to share comments and concerns about the new initiatives in person or through an online survey. Staff will complete a survey periodically regarding their use of PBS. WSHS administrators will analyze behavioral data to investigate if racial, cultural, or language issues contribute to disparities in suspensions for Hispanic, African-American, Special Education, and free/reduced lunch students. Data will also be evaluated to determine how the FCC program is impacting individual students. Staff will be surveyed on their observations of students who have served their suspension at FCC. These surveys will provide information on the social/emotional functioning of those students. In addition, the assistant principal will collect data on each student who served a suspension including demographics, academic achievement, attendance, recidivism, and number of days suspended. The WSHS team's goal for the grant is to reduce the number of suspensions by 20 percent within one school year.

Contact: Valerie Williams, Grant Writer  
[Valerie.Williams@Winona.k12.mn.us](mailto:Valerie.Williams@Winona.k12.mn.us)

## **Conclusion**

The Alternatives-to-Suspension grants have been awarded to four school districts. Year one of the grant is focused on planning and capacity building. As evidenced by this report, the grantees have successfully planned and begun implementation of their alternatives-to-suspension projects. Staff training is a common focus of year one. Some grantees have already made significant progress in decreasing out of school

suspensions and increasing student support. Grantees have developed strategies to use data to inform their program design and monitor effectiveness.

## **References**

American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2006). *Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools?* Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Skiba, R. J. (2002). Special education and school discipline: A precarious balance. *Behavioral Disorders*, 27(2), 81-97.

Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban Review*, 34, 317-332.

## **Resources from the Minnesota Department of Education**

### **Alternatives-to-Suspension Fact Sheet: Outcomes of Out-of-School Suspension**

Evidence from many studies suggests that out-of-school suspension is not effective in deterring behavior problems, and instead, is linked to harmful effects on schools and youth.

### **Alternatives-to-Suspension Fact Sheet: Effective Classroom Management Practices**

Effective classroom management strategies help to prevent student misbehavior and missed instructional time due to disciplinary practices such as out-of-school suspensions and have an impact on instruction and student achievement.

### **Alternatives-to-Suspension Fact Sheet: Multi-Tiered Behavior Support Systems that Reduce Out-of-School Suspensions**

To reduce the use of suspension, educators must develop evidence-based practices to actively teach and reinforce positive student behavior and to address the underlying reasons for misbehavior.

[Fact sheets may be found on the MDE website](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/SpecEdClass/BehavAssessInterv/index.html)

(<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/SpecEdClass/BehavAssessInterv/index.html>).

### **Dangerous Weapons and Disciplinary Incidents Report**

Minnesota Statute Section 121A.06, Subdivision 3, requires the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to annually report on disciplinary incidents, and incidents involving dangerous weapons, that occur in Minnesota public schools. [Data for this report were obtained from MDE's Disciplinary Incident Report System \(DIRS\)](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/WelCome/Legis/LegisRep/index.html)

(<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/WelCome/Legis/LegisRep/index.html>).

### **SNAPSHOTS on Minnesota Youth**

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and Department of Public Safety (DPS) have developed a series of reports about Minnesota's young people. [Each Snapshot](#)

[focuses on issues facing Minnesota youth](https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp/statistical-analysis-center/Pages/snapshots-minnesota-youth.aspx) (https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp/statistical-analysis-center/Pages/snapshots-minnesota-youth.aspx).

### **School Climate**

[MDE provides information and technical assistance to school districts regarding school climate, classroom management, and youth development](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/SchSaf/SchClimate/index.html)

(http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/SchSaf/SchClimate/index.html). Positive school climate intersects with attendance, transition and academic concerns as well as violence prevention, bullying prevention and school safety.

### **Restorative Measures**

[MDE helps schools develop programming, curricula and intervention practices to create safe schools by teaching social skills, building positive school climate and repairing harm when it happens](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/SafeSch/RestorMeas/) (http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/SafeSch/RestorMeas/).

Restorative measures are discipline interventions to hold student accountable for harm and address the needs of students or staff harmed and the needs of the school community.

For more information please contact Cindy Shevlin-Woodcock (651) 582-8656  
[cindy.shevlin-woodcock@state.mn.us](mailto:cindy.shevlin-woodcock@state.mn.us)

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